

MEET AT THE ORG

Blizzard Employees Staged a Walkout to Protest Ban of Pro-Hong Kong Gamer

“Blizzard makes a lot of money in China, but now the company is in this awkward position where we can’t abide by our values,” a Blizzard employee told The Daily Beast.

Blake Montgomery Updated 10.09.19 6:38PM ET
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A small group of Activision Blizzard employees walked out of work Tuesday afternoon to protest the company's actions against a gamer who expressed support for pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong during an official livestream.

The game publisher behind online multiplayer hits like World of Warcraft and Overwatch banned Hong Kong-based professional Hearthstone player Chung Ng Wai from the game's lucrative pro league for a year on Tuesday. Chung, who uses the handle "Blitzchung," prompted the ban after saying "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" during an interview about his tournament wins. Blizzard's actions forced him to forfeit \$10,000 in prize money he had already won.

"The action Blizzard took against the player was pretty appalling but not surprising," a longtime Blizzard employee told The Daily Beast. "Blizzard makes a lot of money in China, but now the company is in this awkward position where we can't abide by our values."

"I'm disappointed," another current Blizzard employee said. "We want people all over the world to play our games, but no action like this can be made with political neutrality." The employees spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of professional consequences.

Protesting Blizzard employees from multiple departments gathered at an iconic statue of an Orc warrior charging into battle in the center of the company's main campus in Irvine, California, starting around 10 a.m. Pacific Time. The demonstration's numbers fluctuated throughout the day, the two employees said, ranging from a dozen to 30, and the protesters departed sometime in the late afternoon. The protesters would have been visible to executive offices, which overlook the main plaza, the two employees said. The company did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Chinese tech giant Tencent owns a 5 percent stake in Blizzard, and the gaming company earned 12 percent of its revenue from the Asia-Pacific region last quarter, according to its earnings reports.

The decision prompted backlash from gamers and non-gamers alike, adding fuel to the fire begun by the National Basketball Association's own controversy over China and the Hong Kong protests.

A person claiming to be a Blizzard employee and using the handle "Standingwhk" posted a picture to Reddit and Imgur that showed roughly 20 employees involved in the demonstration. Several employees held umbrellas, a visual symbol adopted by protesters in Hong Kong. Two current Blizzard employees authenticated the photo to The Daily Beast.

Blizzard has placed plaques with its core company values along a circular compass around the orc. According to the two employees and photos, protesters had papered over one that read, "Every voice matters."

The protesters also solicited signatures for a petition expressing displeasure with Blizzard leadership's handling of the matter that they planned to submit to executives, the two employees said. Discussion about Blizzard's actions and of the protest, they said, continued Wednesday. The two employees said Blizzard executives have not taken any public action against the protesters.

Blizzard's actions inspired a negative reaction among lawmakers, who denounced the gaming giant. On Twitter, Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR) said the company was willing to "humiliate itself" to please China. And Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) declared, "Implications of this will be felt long after everyone in U.S. politics today is gone."



Marco Rubio
@marcorubio

Recognize what's happening here. People who don't live in [#China](#) must either self censor or face dismissal & suspensions. China using access to market as leverage to crush free speech globally. Implications of this will be felt long after everyone in U.S. politics today is gone.
twitter.com/slasher/status...

Rod Breslau @Slasher

Breaking: Effective immediately, Blizzard has removed Hong Kong Hearthstone player blitzchung from Hearthstone Grand Masters, rescinded all his prize money, and have suspended him from pro play for one year for his recent interview.

Statement below twitter.com/Slasher/status...

Upon further review we have found the action has violated the 2019 Hearthstone Grandmasters Official Competition Rules section 6.1 (o) and is individual behavior which does not represent Blizzard or Hearthstone Esports. 6.1 (o) is found below.

2019 HEARTHSTONE® GRANDMASTERS OFFICIAL COMPETITION RULES v1.4 p.12, Section 6.1 (o)

Engaging in any act that, in Blizzard's sole discretion, brings you into public disrepute, offends a portion or group of the public, or otherwise damages Blizzard image will result in removal from Grandmasters and reduction of the player's prize total to \$0 USD, in addition to other remedies which may be provided for under the Handbook and Blizzard's Website Terms.

Grandmasters is the highest tier of Hearthstone Esports and we take tournament rule violations very seriously. After an investigation, we are taking the necessary actions to prevent similar incidents from happening in the future.

Effective immediately, Blitzchung is removed from Grandmasters and will receive no prize for Grandmasters Season 2. Additionally, Blitzchung is ineligible to participate in Hearthstone esports for 12 months beginning from Oct. 5th, 2019 and extending to Oct. 5th, 2020. We will also immediately cease working with both casters.

We'd like to re-emphasize tournament and player conduct within the Hearthstone esports community from both players and talent. While we stand by one's right to express individual thoughts and opinions, players and other participants that elect to participate in our esports competitions must abide by the official competition

9,305 6:04 AM - Oct 8, 2019

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One of the employees who spoke to The Daily Beast felt that the protest signaled a new era for Blizzard. The company has been complying with government censorship requests within its games in order to keep doing business in one of its biggest markets, he said.

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“Doing business in China, it’s been easier to ignore the authoritarianism of the government because they were asking us to do things like remove a skeleton [from a game],” he said.

“The stakes are so much higher now. What was previously an obvious decision is much less obvious now.”





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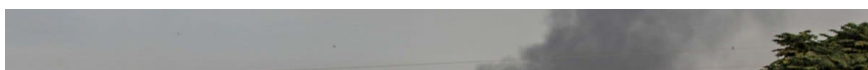
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BACKLASH

Trump's GOP Allies Are Livid at His Inaction on Turkey


A nearly united Congress is prepping new sanctions and furious over the president's abandonment of the Kurds in northern Syria.

Sam Brodey Updated 10.09.19 7:19PM ET
Congressional ReporterPublished 10.09.19 6:43PM ET




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Deilil Souleiman/Getty



Capitol Hill managed a rare show of unity on Wednesday, as lawmakers from both parties recoiled in horror at a lightning-fast Turkish invasion of Kurdish territory in Syria and coalesced around the idea of responding through tough new sanctions on Turkey.

And nearly every single one—regardless of party—blamed President Donald Trump for starting it all, when he abruptly announced on Sunday the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Kurdish lands in northern Syria.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), who spent the week engaging in a lengthy Twitter tirade against the president’s decision, ratcheted up his rhetoric on Wednesday morning against Turkey and the administration.

“Pray for our Kurdish allies who have been shamelessly abandoned by the Trump Administration. This move ensures the reemergence of ISIS,” Graham tweeted on Wednesday. “Will lead effort in Congress to make Erdoğan pay a heavy price.”

By Wednesday afternoon, Graham announced legislation with Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) that would impose aggressive new sanctions on Turkey.

The bill would sanction the U.S. assets of top Turkish leaders, including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; it also would punish any foreign individual or entity who sells weapons or provides military aid to Turkey, or supports the country’s domestic energy industry.

Van Hollen, meanwhile, tweeted on Wednesday morning that Turkey must pay a “heavy price” for its actions. “Senators on both sides of the aisle won’t support abandoning the one regional group most responsible for putting ISIS on its heels.”

Trump himself initially promised to impose crippling sanctions on Turkey if they moved forward with military action against the Kurdish ethnic minority, which has been a steadfast partner



to American military efforts in the region for years but is viewed as a terrorist element by Erdoğan.

“If Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey,” he tweeted.

But by Wednesday afternoon, Trump appeared less committed to the fire and fury in the wake of the invasion, but indicated he had no problem with Graham’s sanctions and still promised to “wipe out” Turkey’s economy if Erdoğan attempted to “wipe out” the Kurds.

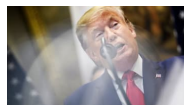
“We’re speaking to both sides. We’ve told President Erodgan how we feel, but we are speaking to both sides and we’re seeing what can be made out of a situation, but we have no soldiers in the area,” Trump told reporters when asked about the decision to abandon the Kurds. “We are getting out of the endless wars. We have to do it.”

The president then, appearing to cite an article on TownHall.com, added the Kurds, “didn’t help us in the Second World War, they didn’t help us with Normandy as an example” ... “but they’re there to help us with their land, and that’s a different thing.”

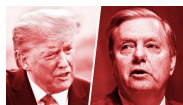
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“With all of that being said, we like the Kurds,” he said.

By the time Trump spoke, Graham and like-minded lawmakers had already determined a tough response was warranted.

“While the Administration refuses to act against Turkey, I expect strong bipartisan support,” Graham said of his legislation.

Indeed, criticism was widespread in the GOP ranks for Trump’s move. While Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), the top House Republican, slammed the move by calling on Turkey to stop it instead of mentioning Trump, Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), the number three House Republican, named names.

The president’s decision to withdraw is “having sickening and predictable consequences,” said Cheney. “The U.S. is abandoning our ally the Kurds, who fought ISIS on the ground and helped protect the U.S. homeland... This action imperils

American security and that of our allies. Congress must and will act to limit the catastrophic impact of this decision.”

The quick turn of events—one of the harshest rebukes yet of GOP establishment foreign policy from a president who never warmed to it in the first place—has left many Republicans on the Hill scratching their heads. “We have maybe one senator happy about this decision,” a GOP staffer told The Daily Beast. “It perplexes me that we’re in a position where the majority of Republicans who will carry the banner of Republicans in the post-Trump era are, saying this is not good.”

Indeed, one of the few GOP lawmakers to cheer the decision was Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), the libertarian-minded Trump confidant who’s urged on the president’s more isolationist instincts over the objections of most of the rest of the party.

In a Twitter victory lap on Wednesday, Paul taunted the “Cheney/Graham Neocon War Caucus” and praised Trump as “the first president in my lifetime to understand what is in the national interest and what is not. He is stopping the endless wars and we will be stronger as a result.”

The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Jim Risch (R-ID), tried to stake out some middle ground on Wednesday in his first statement yet on the Turkey matter. “Turkey’s aggressive actions raise serious concerns. Such an action lacks international support and risks a precipitous decline in the U.S.-Turkey relationship, as President Trump has robustly described,” he said, referencing Trump’s threats. “All parties should immediately de-escalate and return to border security discussions.”

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who controls the floor, criticized the Syria withdrawal as a mistake in a statement on Monday, but stopped short of fully blaming Trump. Asked about McConnell’s support for a sanctions response, a spokesperson for the Senate leader told The Daily Beast he did not have anything to add.

Trump is poised to face widespread backlash from his own party in Congress on Syria if McConnell, or Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), moves to put new sanctions to a vote. Pelosi’s office did not respond to request for comment regarding her position on the issue.

It would not be the first time this year that Trump earns a bipartisan rebuke from Congress over sanctions: in January, 11 GOP senators voted with Democrats in hopes of overturning the administration’s decision to ease sanctions on Russia. The measure ultimately failed to get 60 votes.

Regardless of how Turkey sanctions develop, many from both parties worry that an enormous amount of harm has already been done through Trump’s decision—to the Kurds themselves,

to the region's stability, and to the international reputation of the U.S.

"The damage has been done," said a GOP staffer. "What does it say about us and our future partnerships? How can we level-headedly talk to other nations and say, we want to partner up with you?"

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LESS IS MORE

Republicans to Trump: Shut Up About Your Impeachment

Veterans of past impeachment battles say the way to win them is to pretend that it's not affecting your job. Trump, by contrast, is obsessing over it.

Sam Stein, Asawin Suebsaeng, Sam Brodey

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As President Donald Trump navigates an impeachment process that is upending his presidency, Republicans in the trenches are offering blunt advice: Shut up about impeachment.

The fear emanating from Capitol Hill and other corners of the GOP is that Trump's proclivity for going on the attack is harming his long-term political prospects. And as poll numbers continue to show growing support for impeaching him over his encouragement of foreign governments to investigate Joe Biden's son's work in Ukraine, Republicans are suggesting that he fine-tune his approach.

"He should issue an ever-increasing stream of policy initiatives that have nothing to do with impeachment," said Dick Morris, the longtime GOP political consultant who informally advised President Bill Clinton when he too was facing impeachment. "You just have to make sausage every day and put it up on a

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nail,” he added. “The public will look for other stuff to follow. And that will be what Trump is putting out there.”

Inside the White House, there has been an effort to get Trump to play the role that Clinton did to great effect two decades ago: a president appearing unburdened by the impeachment drama unfolding around him as he focuses on the other tasks of governance. Over the past few weeks, Trump has made speeches touting border security, prescription drug prices, and Medicare Advantage. He has pursued massive alterations to U.S. foreign policy and pushed forward on bilateral trade deals.

But through it all, his attention has drifted back to impeachment with the true nature of his id showing on his Twitter feed, where he has called his Democratic opponents liars and crooks, and encouraged them to be impeached or charged for treason.

“Strategy is dictated by the president and the president very much wants to talk about this [right now],” one White House official said.

That official, along with two others, said on Tuesday that there are currently no plans to change the fight-it-out posture that they’ve adopted. When asked if staying the course was a wise decision given recent polling and other circumstances, one senior Trump administration official simply messaged a pic of the “This Is Fine” meme, featuring an adorable little dog wearing a hat, sipping from a coffee mug, and with a smile and dilated pupils as the room around him or her is engulfed in flames.

“Instead of sending another 15 tweets about how ‘perfect’ his call with the Ukrainian leader was or focusing so much on impeachment, why not just laser-focus your attention on the corruption of Hunter and Joe Biden?” a former White House official asked, rhetorically, also citing poll numbers showing many Americans supporting a Biden probe.

Late last month, President Trump privately assured West Wing officials that there was, for the time being, no need to launch any special initiative or new “war room” to combat the impeachment probe. Instead, the president has opted for more ad hoc measures, like tasking his personal attorneys Rudy Giuliani and Jay Sekulow with coordinating messaging and, potentially, a legal strategy against the Bidens and Democratic lawmakers. A hallmark of that approach has been to paint the press as not just biased but inherently dumb, such as when Giuliani was asked by a Daily Beast reporter this week about who financed his work to dig up dirt on the former vice president.

“Quote this,” the Trump attorney replied. “Nobody would ask such a stupid question unless they were in the tank from Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.”

The president’s regular advisers on impeachment remain a tight-knit crew. Neither Morris nor Mark Penn (Clinton’s pollster during his impeachment) indicated they have been contacted by the White House despite both having consulted with Trump or his campaign in the past. And inside that circle, there is a widely held belief that impeachment, while a gigantic nuisance, presents a few political opportunities as well, as illustrated by the Trump campaign’s massive fundraising hauls.

Outside that circle, however, there is a growing belief Trump may be able to do more if he simply did less.

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“If I was the president I would ignore the impeachment process as much as you could,” said Ed Rollins, a veteran GOP strategist who now leads the pro-Trump group Great America PAC. Told that that seemed unlikely, Rollins replied, “You are asking me what my advice would be, not what advice would be taken.”

Private GOP polling data from swing seats in the House of Representatives that was shared with The Daily Beast underscored the dynamic that Rollins outlined. Support for impeachment stood at roughly between 40-45 percent, with an additional 30-35 percent saying Trump’s actions were inappropriate, though not impeachable. Those numbers, according to the Republican pollster who conducted the surveys, illustrated a debate on a knife’s edge, with the possibility that a flood of voters could end up being persuaded that impeachment was justified or, alternatively, that Democrats were overreaching.

Faced with such uncertainty, elected Republicans have been largely content to see where public opinion goes, with all but the most doggedly pro-Trump members ducking interviews on TV. The GOP counter-messaging on the impeachment push got off to a rough start when party leaders initially struggled on TV to defend Trump. In an appearance that made even Hill Republicans wince, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) went on *60 Minutes* on Sep. 28 and disputed what was clearly



so on grounds that the impeachment process is procedurally and morally corrupt. Several White House aides and elected Republicans said that they believed forcing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) to actually hold a full House vote to begin impeachment proceedings would end up showing that a majority of members did not support doing so, after which—the prediction went—a civil war would break out within the ranks.

“What is she afraid of or waiting for?” one senior White House officials said, “Simple math—are the votes there? Put up or shut up.”

There is no constitutional requirement to hold an impeachment vote and Pelosi has encouraged her deputies, led by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff (D-CA), to continue their investigations. How far those investigations can go, however, remains unclear.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, canceled his scheduled deposition before Schiff’s committee the same morning he was to appear. Before his abrupt cancellation, Sondland was expected to be asked if he was aware of a quid-pro-quo arrangement that linked U.S. military aid for Ukraine to an investigation into the Bidens.

Schiff responded to Sondland’s absence with a subpoena and a warning that the stonewalling would be considered part of an article of impeachment, based on obstruction of justice. In the past, such a threat would potentially compel a White House to seek some sort of accommodation. But later in the day, White House counsel Pat Cipollone sent a letter to the Hill disputing the very legitimacy of the Democrats’ probe, and arguing that

“your ‘Inquiry’ is constitutionally invalid and violates basic due process rights and the separation of powers.”

Morris said he saw no risk in the White House doing so, so long as they did so within the bounds of the law. The outcome of impeachment, he predicted, was already clear, regardless of how cooperative the president was going to be.

“No matter what Trump says or doesn’t say, does or doesn’t do, he is going to get impeached. But the flip side of that is he isn’t going to get removed,” Morris said, reflecting the likelihood that the GOP-controlled Senate would not cast a two-thirds vote if Trump were on trial. “The Republican base will become, in effect, a firing squad to shoot any Republican senator who votes to remove him.”



Sam Stein
Politics Editor
@samstein
sam.stein@thedailybeast.com



Asawin Suebsaeng
White House Reporter
@swin24
asawin.suebsaeng@thedailybeast.com



Sam Brodey
Congressional Reporter
Sam.Brodey@thedailybeast.com

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